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*For Mamola Begum  
and the women of Rampur*



This world is but a tale we hear,  
Men's evil and glory disappear.

*Shahnameh*  
Abolqasem Ferdowsi

*Chahiye naam usi ka ae khama,  
Zeenat-e-naam zeb sar nama,  
Falak uski namoona qudrat ka;  
Ek qalamdaan hazaar sanat ka  
Rukh-e-qartaas ko safai di  
Aur siyahi ko roshanai di.*

I invoke His exalted name as my cup-bearer of inspiration,  
The beauteous name of the Creator of miraculous heavens,  
Who imbued the humble inkstand with artistic inspiration;  
Who granted whiteness and purity to the face of the page,  
And illuminated the darkness of black ink.

*Tilism-e-Hoshruha*  
Sayeed Muhammad Husain Jah





## *Prologue*

The Nawab was gone, leaving a gaping cavity in the weed-ridden grass.

Ameera pressed her face close to the school-bus window and peered out at the empty space. The school buses had stopped in a clamorous yellow line and the students jostled around the windows. A few senior students jumped down, ignoring the dire threats of the teachers. Crowds had gathered around the little unkempt garden and some men had climbed over the iron grill to examine the hollow, keeping a safe distance from the officious policemen.

Ameera was accustomed to looking at the familiar marble statue on the way to school. Dadi had told her that the Nawab was their ancestor. He had been married to Dadi's great-grandmother—a scandalous family history which Dadi loved to narrate.

Towering over scattered bougainvillea and wild cannabis bushes in the triangular garden, the statue of Nawab Shams Ali Khan had stood in full court attire, rows of pearls covering his chest and forearms, the legs slightly apart, one hand holding the sword at his side. It was magnificent despite the black fungus patches. A few years ago, the Nawab's nose had been broken and the sword by his side taken away by vandals, prompting the district administration to enclose the garden with an iron grill and secure it with a gate. That morning, the gate was found locked, as usual, but the statue had vanished.

She must tell Dadi.

That was the first disappearance. Soon, the three ancient *topkhana* gateways, with their scalloped arches leading into the city, were almost magically wiped out. The old became a memory as the new gates forced themselves into their consciousness. In time, fewer people would know the gates had ever existed.

***Photograph 1885 (approximate year)***

In a formal official picture taken probably at the British Agent's office at Bareilly, a ten-year-old Shams Ali Khan stands wearing a black *achkan*, a gold watch chain dangling from his breastpocket, a black *topi* on his head and a confident, smug half-smile.<sup>1</sup> His complexion, costume and age are a stark contrast to the white-skinned, distinguished, thick-moustached and clean-shaven British officials towering over him. Even as a child he looks sure of himself and his position among the British officials. He was, after all, the crown prince of Sherpur State. The officials shook his hand and British ladies fawned over him, offering cakes as he spoke his tutored English lines.

He stands behind an important-looking official, probably the British Agent, seated on an armchair, stiff, in control; his wife next to him, smiles primly at the camera; a thoroughbred Jack Russell at her feet looks away, alert. Three other ladies in their fashionable, prudish gowns and the gentlemen in their formal suits with medals pinned on their coats, lounge on dissimilar chairs.

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1. The princely state of Sherpur came under the administrative supervision of the British Agent stationed at Bareilly.